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TAGS: [SENV](#) [EAID](#) [AMGT](#) [XW](#) [BY](#) [RW](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: U/S OTERO TALKS WATER IN ETHIOPIA

SUMMARY

[¶1.](#) (U) On January 30, 2010, Under Secretary (U/S) for Global Affairs, Maria Otero, met with USG partners implementing programs to improve access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WaSH) for people in Ethiopia. The meeting was hosted by USAID and included the Deputy Chief of Mission, the Regional Environment Officer and representatives from CARE, Save the Children USA, the International Rescue Committee, and Merlin. Discussion focused on water challenges in Ethiopia, with U/S Otero soliciting information on how the U.S. can strengthen its response. From gender issues, to trends that indicate chronic food security issues may be overlooked in lieu of responding to pressing emergencies, interaction with Ethiopia's government officials, and funding challenges, the group covered significant ground. End Summary.

BACKGROUND AND STATISTICS

[¶2.](#) (U) Ethiopia has one of Africa's lowest rates of access to safe drinking water supply in spite of its ostensibly abundant surface and groundwater resources. Despite recent reform measures, the level of sanitation coverage in the country remains low; only 11% of the population has access to adequate sanitation. It is estimated that 73,700 annual child deaths occur in Ethiopia due to diarrheal disease. According to a representative from the International Rescue Committee (IRC), 25% of Ethiopia's population lacks access to safe drinking water. In a country of approximately 77 million people where the IRC reports an estimated 85% are rural subsistence farmers, small and localized droughts in this 65% arid and semi-arid land can affect up to a million inhabitants and risk displacement and conflict. In 2008, USAID/Ethiopia invested over USD six million while working in close partnership with Ethiopian national and local government agencies, civil society organizations, and local

communities to increase sustainable access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). USAID highlighted that it remains committed to continuing these partnerships and achieving results on the ground.

Gender Issues

13. (U) All participants agreed that water is a task and burden that primarily falls to the women of Ethiopia. Addressing water needs and making water more accessible can cut down on the amount of time women must spend gathering water, thereby freeing female children to attend school, breaking a cycle of young girls marrying early (and having many children) because they lack alternatives to marriage, and older women can spend more time on productive endeavors on the farm, related to pastoralist livelihoods, or working on small business activities. Moreover, many noted that when women and girls must travel long distances to retrieve water, they are exposed to safety and security hazards that can be mitigated when nearby safe drinking water sources are established.

14. (U) Working to bring safe water sources closer to communities, the Save the Children USA representative noted that they have partnered with USAID to implement community-school WASH partnerships in four major regions of Ethiopia. The programs address emergency water needs and also test community water supply systems. CARE added that the multi-donor food program, the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), incorporates successful WASH initiatives that include rural irrigation schemes, time saving potable water options, and health-related sanitation programs. IRC added that it is involved in water care and maintenance programs in and around refugee camps, creating 200-300 meter bore holes and large-scale water storage capacity. The NGOs pointed out that by encouraging the development of community-based WASH committees similar in structure to PTAs (to collect and manage fees at community water points, for example) that include women as members, WASH initiatives also have the capacity to empower women at the community level. These types of bottom-up structures, according to the NGOs, can also expose communities to small-scale democratic institutions and concepts.

GoE Responsiveness

15. (U) According to the group of USG WASH Partners, the Government of Ethiopia is both engaged and interested in WASH development, particularly in the infrastructure, or hardware, of water. The group noted that, in Ethiopia's top down system, government policies exist at federal level down through to the rural level, but that problems arise because the rural communities lack resources to implement policies. It is at the rural, local community level that NGOs feel they have the most value-added to bring to the table, focusing on building capacity and provide training vs. handing over hardware.

WATER AND FOOD INSECURITY

16. (U) According to a representative from UK-based Merlin, approximately 14 million of an estimated 77 million Ethiopians are on food assistance. He noted with concern, however, that this group of chronically food insecure is increasingly being overlooked as disaster response funding gains momentum. Disaster response funding is designed to confront food emergencies that are generally linked

to a lack of access to safe drinking water. In the Merlin representative's opinion, this a short-term exercise of putting out

fires that is crowding out funding for the real underlying and fundamental cause of food insecurity. He urged the group to prioritize their objectives and not forget this chronic food insecure baseline as funding for emergencies continues to flow.

17. (U) With the onset of climate-based changes, in addition to continued population increases that will further stress limited natural resources, the NGOs called upon USAID to use its vast experience in WaSH-related activities to strengthen national and regional institutions so that they can plan and prepare for change.

U/S Otero agreed that with approximately USD 500 million WaSH funding invested around the world, USAID's experience in this field is unmatched. Acknowledging a nexus between environment and security that carries foreign policy implications, she discussed the fact that she is elevating water at the State Department. U/S Otero also encouraged the group of NGOs to coordinate with USAID and Department of State embassy colleagues to arrange meetings with visiting Congressional delegations, using the opportunity to explain the full myriad of Ethiopia's complexities to the USG officials.

Funding Challenges

18. (U) The NGOs present at the USAID-hosted WaSH meeting with U/S Otero took the opportunity to express frustrations with funding cycles. They emphasized that multi-year funding, around two-four years, is extremely important to developing, implementing, and maintaining sustainable WaSH programs. Time is needed to develop water sources for communities, to establish partnerships with the local government and the community, to instill the notion of ownership for sustainability, to procure supplies, etc. The NGOs also commented that WaSH earmarks are too restrictive, requiring reports on numbers of people reached versus encouraging innovation.

They would prefer a flexible environment where they would have some space to experiment, scaling up successful, innovative pilots. U/S Otero closed the meeting by expressing her gratitude for all the hard work and dedication of the NGO community to effect positive change in Ethiopia.

19. Nicole Goldin, Special Assistant to Under Secretary Maria Otero, cleared this cable.

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